THE PASSION TO MOVE A CITY

April 8, 1990

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Isaiah 50:4-9a
Matthew 21:1-17

"...all the city was stirred, saying, 'Who is this?'"
-Matthew 21:10b (RSV)

The story is told of a preacher who began his pastoral prayer at the Sunday service this way: "O Lord, have you seen the New York Times this morning?" [The Naked Public Square, Richard John Neuhaus, p. 3]

His ecclesiastical affiliation is not identified, but I'll bet he was a Presbyterian... And I'll bet he prayed like that on Palm Sunday. Because today is the day when religion and life radically intersect. Today is the day Jesus came to the city. Came that is to say, into the focal center of human life: where human beings are at their best and worst, where life is lived thoroughly, where the noise is louder, the colors more brilliant, the buildings higher, the art more beautiful, and the suffering more hurtful than anywhere else. I'll bet he prayed it on Palm Sunday from a city pulpit because the unavoidable conclusion of this day's events is that when Jesus and the life of the world intersect - in the city - things begin to happen.

Karl Barth was the one who said the modern Christian should always have the open Bible in one hand and the open newspaper in the other. Barth also said that preaching was the "meeting of the infinite contradictions of life and the infinite mystery of the word of God."

After three years of teaching, preaching and healing, mainly in the towns and open rural areas of Galilee, Jesus decided to go to Jerusalem. He wanted, he said, to celebrate the Passover in the capital, the City of David. Thousands of people came every year from all over Judea. The city was crowded, swollen to several times its normal size. It was both solemn and joyful. The pilgrims went to the Temple, of course; a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make a sacrifice in the Temple of Solomon. And so the entrepreneurs who set up booths to change Roman money into Jewish coins and the merchants who sold the appropriate sacrificial animals, turned the outer court of the Temple into the first century equivalent of Water Tower Place on a warm Saturday afternoon in April.

The authorities always got nervous at Passover. After all, the pilgrims were in Jerusalem to celebrate their liberation from foreign oppression centuries before. Passover was not simply a religious holiday; it was also a patriotic, nationalistic celebration, always conducive to random acts of violence if not major insurrection. So the Romans beefed up the city guard. The Governor moved from his palace at Caesarea Philippi to be in residence in Jerusalem during Passover. And the Temple officials, the High Priests and their entourage, who served as the religious heads of the nation at Rome's discretion, were the most nervous of all. They had most to lose if something should go wrong during the Passover.

So is it any wonder that his best friends advised Jesus not to go? He already had a minor reputation as a trouble maker. Growing crowds of people gathered throughout Galilee to hear him talk, to receive his blessing, to be healed, to touch his robe. And recently, wherever he went, there were people from the Jerusalem Temple, listening carefully, taking notes, challenging, arguing, objecting.

Common sense dictated caution, prudence. His friends were worried. And then, on the outskirts of the city, several miles away at Bethany, where his friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus lived, he began to act in a way that was even more frightening, either in absolute courage or absolute foolishness. And now, they stumbled along behind him, full of terror, swept along on a tide he seemed deliberately to start.

It began when he asked for a donkey. He had walked the length and breadth of the countryside for three years and now, for the last few miles, he wanted to ride. In fact his instructions were quite specific. When the crowds of pilgrims saw him, they recognized the scene immediately. The prophet Zechariah described it centuries earlier:

> "Behold, your king is coming to you,
> humble and mounted on an ass, and on
> a colt, the foal of an ass."

And so, in a moment of patriotic passion, they ripped the branches from the trees and the very cloaks from their backs and they shouted:

> "Hosanna to the Son of David!
> Blessed is he who comes in
> the name of the Lord"...

which, if you are the Roman governor, sounds like the beginning of an insurrection... As I read the story again this year, I thought about how that crowd chanting Jewish patriotic slogans must have sounded to the Romans exactly like the crowds holding candles in Wenceslas Square must have sounded to the tottering Communist government in Prague.

And even if it is a slight exaggeration, surely there is great passion in Matthew's aside. "All the city was stirred, saying 'Who is this?'" It is above all else a very passionate scene.

Playwright, Neil Simon, in a commencement address, told his audience that the secret to writing good plays, producing good art of any kind, was passion; passion that does not act from fear of failure, passion that takes risks and knows nothing of caution and timidity. Had he been afraid of taking a chance, Michelangelo, Simon quipped, would have painted the Sistine floor and it would have been rubbed out long ago.

Jesus had such a passion for this day that what he did next almost doesn't fit into our categories of reasonable, sensible behavior. He went directly to the Temple and there in a white hot, righteous anger, overturned the tables of the money changers and drove out the merchants. And, as if he had the right to the place, sat down in the Temple and received the blind and the lame and the little children: the homeless, the powerless, the excluded, all those ordinarily not present in that place.

And if there was any doubt about how this drama will conclude, there is no longer.

Why do you suppose he did it? Why take all these unnecessary chances? Why not lose himself in the crowd, slip into the city, do what he wanted to do discreetly, slip back out and return to his unfinished work in Galilee? In fact, why go at all? Plenty of people did not go. Plenty of people never took the chance of going to the city.

There are two reasons, I believe. The first is his passion for God. Jesus lived out of a sense that he was God's man; that his calling - his vocation - was to confront the reality of the world with the reality of God's Kingdom. There is a sense in which you cannot do that thoroughly until you go to the city. Jesus was possessed by a passion for God's Kingdom, for God's reign in the world which results in a new order of things: a new being characterized by justice and compassion... a way of being in which all people are honored as God's children and treated with fairness and kindness. He must, therefore, live out that passion in that place where God's reign seems most remote and distant and fragile, namely the city which has always been secular.

It is precisely in the city where living without passion suggests itself as a way to cope. It is precisely in the city where we learn to restrain our capacity for caring deeply in order to protect ourselves from bleeding to death over the human suffering about which we, after all, can do nothing. What can I do about the man who regularly sleeps in the southeast doorway, who is mentally ill, chemically addicted, physically ill, who does not wish to be indoors, who wishes only for money with which to buy another bottle of cheap wine and then to be left alone? There is not much I can do. And so I cope with him by teaching myself not to care too much. Or what, after all, can I do about the crowd of young men on the corner of Division and Orleans who are already passing the bottle in the brown paper bag among them this morning so that before we hear the benediction the pain of unemployment and meaningless despair will be blissfully dead? Not much, actually, so we plan not to drive that way and if we do not see them then we will not have to care.

Apathy is a coping mechanism for living sanely in the city. And if it weren't for the fact that apathy is also a symptom of illness, it might actually work. The truth is that we are alive only to the degree that we can experience passion, can care deeply enough to weep as Jesus wept over the city; to get angry enough to throw caution to the wind as he did when he overthrew the tables of those who were trivializing religion. The truth is you are alive to the degree that you care deeply enough to alter your own behavior by reaching out in healing love to the unlovely, the outcast, the powerless. Interestingly, we are not the first to conclude that apathy might preserve our lives. In ancient Greece when the city states were dissolving and the organizing principles of life seemed to be vanishing, a philosopher by the name of Epicurus suggested that smart people would withdraw from public life and political activity, arguing that everything essential for human happiness can be found in the private sphere. To live well privately is the way to be happy, Epicurus taught. And so it would seem we have concluded as a culture: to buy, to consume, to fuel this economy with an ever increasing appetite for consumer goods: to tell ourselves we are living well when we have bought everything in sight: to anesthetize moral sensitivity with the rhetoric of selfishness.

And it might be possible for us - except for the decision the one we know as Lord made on this day.

In fact, religion itself - with its attention directed to the other world, to the realm of the spirit - might even be an Epicurean alternative to becoming passionate about life in the city, except for the fact that the one for whom the religion is named, made a strikingly "this-worldly" and overtly political gesture on the first day of the last week of his life.

One of the books receiving a lot of scholarly attention recently is The Political Meaning of Christianity by Glenn Tinder. Professer Tinder also provided a fine essay for the Atlantic Monthly last December, "Can We Be Good Without God?"

I found it a timely commentary on the Palm Sunday story. Professor Tinder observes:

> "We are so used to thinking of spirituality as withdrawal from the world and human affairs that it is hard to think of it as political. Spirituality is personal and private, we assume, while politics is public. But such a dichotomy drastically diminishes spirituality, construing it as a relationship to God without implications for one's relationship to the surrounding world. The notion that we can be related to God and not to the world - that we can practice a spirituality that is not political - is in conflict with the Christian understanding of God."

I am sure that one of the things Jesus' friends warned him about was the danger of mixing religion and politics. And I am sure that his decision to go to the capital city was a passionate commitment to the exact opposite, namely to politics as the place where religion is ultimately

expressed. Professor Tinder, an historian, argues that the values around which our body politic is organized, the dignity of the individual and equality, come from Judeo-Christian religion. Without its religious foundation, says Tinder, "Government comes to the aid of only the well organized and influential,... Politics is left to those who find it profitable and useful... carried out for the sake of power and influence." [Atlantic Monthly, Dec. 89, p. 69-85]

With you, I agonize over the plight of Ryan White, who died last night in an Indianapolis hospital, of the AIDS he contracted by blood transfusions. But our feelings about Ryan White are only sentimentality, which is both cheap and ineffective - until they build to the compassion which is passion seeking a way to change the world. For, in fact, bigotry and benign neglect have allowed this epidemic. And we have not yet committed ourselves to its control and eradication. There are not enough hospital beds for the people now dying of AIDS in our cities, nor a health care system that can begin to cope with them nor the will to talk clearly about how people get AIDS and how they can avoid getting AIDS. The remedies are not in the arena of emotion sentiment. They are financial and political. And so it goes. We cannot afford to build houses for the homeless poor. We cannot afford the economic support system to allow affordable housing to be constructed in the private sector. But we can afford a Stealth Bomber no one seems to want, and an astonishing number of experts say doesn't work, for one billion dollars per plane. So if you want to do something more than crying your sentiment over the plight of the residents of Cabrini-Green, your religion will become political - as Jesus' did.

The first responsibility of the Christian Church in the city is to remember the day Jesus came to Jerusalem. It is to be to the city what he was - first of all, passionate in its devotion to God's Kingdom which means justice and compassion in the public arena, equality and inclusiveness in the marketplace. It is to be a presence in this most secular place in the world, a living reminder of a God who cares deeply about individuals. And so its job is simply to see those from whom the city averts its eyes: to open its arms to those the city is inclined to overlook: and to advocate the cause of those who have no voice and no power, who are not and never will be a voting block. Its job is to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless. Its job is to do what Jesus did that wonderful day when, after he had claimed space, he sat down and received the blind and lame and children.

Jesus came to the city because of his passion for God's Kingdom as it intersects human life. But there was another reason, I think. A very human one. I have never believed that Jesus was simply playing out a script God had written for him. Nor have I been able to believe that he knew ahead of time how it would all end. I do not believe Jesus knew about Easter morning on Palm Sunday. In fact, I believe he faced this last week of his life not knowing what would happen but determined to be true to himself, to find courage to live out his convictions. That is, I believe Jesus had a passion for his own life.

Jesus knew a secret, namely that the significance, the meaning, of an individual human life is determined by the degree to which that life is lived in service of some cause higher than its own protection and preservation. Jesus knew that you receive your life when you give it away: that you discover your life when you find something you love enough to die for. German theologian Juergan Moltmann wrote:

> "Where Jesus is, there is life. There is abundant life, vigorous life, loved life, eternal life. There is life before death." [The Passion for Life, p. 19]

So he didn't know that in five short days the crowd that welcomed him with glad "hosannas" would be replaced by another crowd screaming for his crucifixion. But I believe he did know it was a possibility. He did not know how much of his life was left. Nor do we. His passion for however much was left - five years, or five days - led him to live every day as if it were his last; every day as if it had eternal value.

This day calls us so to live... to remember the glad, triumphant welcome, to hear the familiar story and sing the familiar hymns and then get up off these pews and start to live our lives with something approaching that intentionality... and in the process change the world.

Frederick Beuchner has written beautifully about the hopefulness of this wonderful but terrible day:

> "It's like watching a movie or play you've seen many times before. You know how it ends but in spite of what you know, you cannot help hoping that this time the heroine will not die... the calvary will arrive on time... so Christians hear the story of the Passion hoping this time Judas will be loyal; Peter will be brave; Pilate will sink to his knees before him, the Pharisees, the Sanhedrin, the high priest himself will welcome him... the cross won't have to happen and all history will be redeemed without agony... and you and I will go to church, or wherever we go, not as strangers... and we won't need any choir to sing for us or preachers to preach because just being together under God will be song enough.'" [A Room Called Remember, p. 73]

But the cross did happen. They arrested him and tried him and crucified him. And before we come back here next week we must enter into the terrible reality that he died on a Friday because of his passion for the city on a Sunday. And if we are strong enough to face that we will feel within us that the story is far from over. In fact, the story of Palm Sunday actually concludes in your life... as you leave this celebration and re-enter the city... whatever city is your home. The cross does happen but the ending is different if what you have heard and experienced today pierces your heart and you do something passionate like shouting "Hosanna. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."

-Something like stepping out of the watching, apathetic crowd and falling in behind him, as he stirs the city...

-Something like giving your life to him, and in that giving discovering that you are, by God's grace and passionate love, alive after all.

Blessed be the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

Hosanna.

Amen.